

THE STORE DETECTIVE AND HER THIEF TRAPS

EVER Vigilant to Catch the Shoplifter, She Figures in Many a Drama of Wrecked Reputation, and If She Errs Her Mistakes Are Usually Costly

HUMAN interest lurks under many masks in the great department store, but no work done in these mercantile establishments presents more dramatic or pathetic aspects than that of the store detective. The shoplifter often devises schemes of remarkable ingenuity, and in these cases she is pitted against the merchant's thief catcher in a sharp battle of wits. There are also simple instances of foolhardy, impulsive pilfering that are easy to detect, yet scarcely less disastrous in their consequences than are the frauds of the hardened professional. Barbara Deering, out of her long experience in big stores, describes how store detectives are chosen, the problems they must solve and the disadvantages under which they work.

BY BARBARA DEERING.

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BETWEEN the customer examining the merchandise as it lies temptingly upon the counters and the saleswoman, explaining its unusual value and the reason for its inflated price, stands the special officer.

The special officer may be young or old, tall or short of stature, but she must have an appearance which will allow her to pass in a crowd without notice and she must be an apparently careless spectator. She is to be found in every section of the department store, silent, secretive, accurate in judgment, watching the particular merchandise whose safety she is responsible for, waiting for the shoplifter.

The special officer is employed upon a different basis from any one else in the store. While she is responsible to no one but the head of her department, the chief of the detective bureau, she is active in lending assistance to the buyer of the department where she is stationed, to the salesman and to the management office. They are all interested in her work, for if she is skilful she can save the store thousands of dollars.

Until a few years ago there were few special officers. The need for such a person was made evident by the fact that the woman who came to shoplift was generally sufficiently experienced to recognize the house detective hovering near in a department store.

It is so unusual to find a man standing idly at a counter or roaming aimlessly about that he is noticeable, but a woman can spend hours at one bargain counter, she can price and reprieve as long as she is able to loiter inconspicuously, she can trail the most expert shoplifter for hours without causing suspicion as to her motives.

Where does the special officer come from and how does she get the training? She comes from a private detective agency, where she enters upon a business career that most women would shrink from and fail to understand. The chances are that she was not familiar with its intricacies when she embarked upon it.

Needing work she obtained a position where she had to shadow persons whose description and habits were furnished to her. Her principal asset at the time of her first employment was, in the cynical words of the proprietor of the detective agency who engaged her, her commonplace appearance. This proved the keynote for her advancement.

The chief of the detective bureau gave much the same reason for employing her as her former employer had done, and one woman thanked her lucky stars that she was born with a personality that did not attract attention, a face that no one felt impelled to turn to for a second glance. Also she gave thanks that she was no longer that bateful creature a "shadower," but bore instead the euphonious title of "special officer."

One of the first privileges granted her was the authority to make arrests and to appear in court against offenders should she have the fortune to capture them. Invested with this authority she took her place in the store, walking about or leaning against a counter with an air of carelessness. From her various places of vantage she watched both customers and salespeople, making mental notes of every transaction and pausing long enough to see whether there was anything demanding investigation. Surely that woman pricing the shirt waists had had two before her on the counter a minute ago, but there was only one now. What had become of the second waiste? The customer, having purchased a waiste, flaunted past the special officer. Was there ground for suspicion?

The special officer must act quickly, but she must be cautious. If she should accuse an innocent customer the blunder would not only be unforgivable but the department store might get into serious trouble. When she is sent upon the floor to safeguard the merchandise she is admonished to exercise the most extreme caution in regard to the customers. The customer is always first and must be considered before anything. Rather than offend one innocent customer it is far better to allow a dozen guilty ones to escape.

As a rule she does not deem it advisable to take the saleswoman into her confidence, especially when she merely has suspicions, for the saleswoman would become excited and would hinder rather than help. Again, in the mind of the average saleswoman a customer suspected is a customer guilty, and forever after she will remember the one pointed out as a shoplifter, regardless of subsequent developments.

She quickly follows the suspicious person. As she goes a nod to another special officer stationed in the next department will suffice to insure her department being "covered" during her absence.

Perhaps the customer may remain in the store for hours. She may make purchases and her actions may cause a reasonable doubt in the mind of the special officer, who will let her go after making a permanent mental note of the incident. When in the future the customer comes into the store she relaxes only when she is convinced that she has made a mistake.

Or the suspected person may almost convince her, but not quite. She may have a charge account and she may act in such a manner as to throw off distrust for the time until some day, when the shirt waiste incident has been forgotten by all but the special officer, the customer will help herself to something else. The special officer chuckles. She was right. The woman has the evidence of guilt and must be captured. The special officer trails her, following at a safe distance, unobserved but observing, edging now a little closer, then darting back to safety, and after her once more.

Nabbing a Shoplifter.

At last the shoplifter is ready to leave the store. She may walk hurriedly or in a leisurely manner to the street. The special officer waits for the moment. She cannot stop or accuse any one beneath the roof of the store, but her hands itch to lay their restraining grasp upon the shoulder of the shoplifter.

"Madam, I think you had better come with me," are her words to the woman who imagines she has gotten away the second time.

The woman generally demands an explanation. "I guess you know the reason," the special officer replies, showing her badge. "I advise you to keep quiet and make no trouble, but come."

In the detective office of the large department store is a room into which the shoplifter is taken, the special officer accompanying her. As a rule a second special officer is called, and together they search and question the woman. She may become bitter and revile the special officer who detected her, threatening all sorts of vengeance, or she may implore and pray for mercy. Back of her fall may be a history that will bring tears to the eyes of the most hardened special officer. On the other hand, everything may point to the inexcusability of her offence. She may be well dressed, a woman of apparent culture and refinement and with no possible reason for her lapse; the tears that sprinkle her face are not those of anguish at her plight, but rather anger and annoyance at being subjected to humiliation.

Everywhere outside the locked room where she is detained things are going on as usual. She hears the rumble of the elevators, the boys calling out the floors and enumerating the merchandise to be found on each. Her position alone is abnormal and terrible.

Finally the chief appears before her, accompanied by the special officer. He regards her long and thought-

fully and his expression is one of disgust. "There is no excuse for you," he tells her, "and I think that I shall make an example of you."

Then come more tears and entreaties; truths that she has evaded, her real name and address. Nothing is too sacred for him to know now if she can coax or cajole him into letting her go. One by one she uses every known means of supplication. The chief relents. "I will let you off this time," he tells her, "but," he adds as he sees her look of relief, "you must first write a confession of your threats and sign it. When you have done this two special officers will accompany you to your home, where you will turn over to them everything you have ever taken."

The shoplifter signs her confession. Her name may be a prominent one and her home in an exclusive neighborhood. She may have a husband and a family who would never dream of her dishonesty. Nevertheless, accompanied by two special officers, away she goes. Everything may be a blurred remembrance to her later on, when she tries to recall it. She only realizes that she has been detected stealing, has made restitution and has escaped punishment, but in the archives of the detective bureau of the department store there is recorded her complete history and her crime, together with a signed confession, while across the charge account in the department of accounts, where her name had been honored and respected, is written in large red letters the words, "Detected at shoplifting and account closed."

It is not only the ordinary customers who steal; in fact, they are in the minority. It is the professional shoplifter, the special officer has to contend with. This class is, as a rule, so clever that it is indeed difficult to capture them. When, however, the professional is captured punishment is meted out not only by her own store but by every department store in the city where the professional has been plying her trade. Often when the professional is captured thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise is recovered and every department store is given the opportunity to identify its goods and get them back.

The professional shoplifter has a peculiar method of working. Strangely enough, she does not frequent the department store at times when it is crowded, for then the special officer is more alert than usual, sometimes the force of special officers being doubled as an added precaution. A rainy day or stormy weather, when there are few customers about, is a more opportune time. On these days the saleswomen are inclined to become dilatory and the lack of customers will make a casual inspection so simple that the special officer may be called away from her post, thus leaving her section temporarily unguarded.

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In all departments where garments of any sort, even dresses, are on sale the professional shoplifter manages to doff her own clothes, garb herself in the choicest the department affords and walk calmly away without causing notice.

How is this done and why is she not stopped by the saleswomen or the buyer of the department? In the department store it is customary for an article when sold to be worn out by the customer. If a saleswoman sees a customer pass her wearing a new hat or gown she naturally thinks that another sales-

woman has made a sale, and she experiences envy rather than suspicion. Moreover, it is "not her funeral."

Difficulty of Detection.

Unless the special officer is on the spot and has witnessed the whole affair how can she take it upon herself to assume the responsibility of asserting when she sees a woman wearing a garment out of a department that it has been stolen? Her work comes after the shoplifter has disappeared with a valuable garment, leaving a discarded one in its place. Then, with the buyer, the salesman and the saleswoman she views the substituted article.

From all sides comes advice and proffered assistance. Each saleswoman has a description of every customer who was in the department where the garment was taken. They even suspect their own customers. Finally, they recall some woman who acted in a peculiar manner, and she is singled out.

Her description, perhaps her name, is given and off goes the special officer on what in her heart she believes to be a wild goose chase. There may be a chance, however, and she must spend several days looking up the clue. After a fruitless effort the search for the missing garment is abandoned, the buyer takes the loss in her department, and the spe-

cial officer relaxes her vigilance. The matter is allowed to drop until one day, when least expected and in the same mysterious manner, another garment disappears.

It happened once that a professional shoplifter fell under the ban of a special officer, an expert who could track the most wary. She had been trailing her for weeks. She was positive that the woman was an old offender, but she never could manage to catch her. One day she saw the woman help herself to several yards of real Irish lace, which lay for a moment unguarded, and followed the woman at a safe distance, waiting for her to leave the store. This she was in no hurry to do. After strolling about she stopped in the ladies' waiting room, where she redressed her hair and remade her rather careless toilet. Then in leisurely fashion she sauntered out of the store.

When the special officer stopped her and informed her that her presence was requested in the detective bureau she expressed her willingness to go, with a great show of injured innocence. In the little room, connecting with that of the chair she was subjected to a search, but nothing incriminating was found upon her. There was no trace of the Irish lace. Evidently a mistake had been made, an apology was offered to the woman, who was now quite indignant, and the special officer was sent back to her department with a reprimand and clear instructions to be more careful in the future if she wished to retain her position.

In the gloomy days that followed the special officer was made to feel her disgrace. Some of her important assignments were taken from her and she had plenty of time in which to think.

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One day when a beautiful lace scarf went into the hand satchel, followed by neckwear, jewelry and other merchandise, the special officer was in the seventh heaven of delight.

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When the women were brought before the chief it was proven that they were old offenders and were by every department store in the city. The special officer was highly praised, and the chief acknowledged that he had felt positive all along that she could scarcely have been guilty of such an unpardonable blunder. When the victory of her capture died away she was reinstated in favor and assigned to the important work of looking out for a group of notorious

shoplifters who were reported to be on their way from the West with a new system of riding the department stores.

Every hour the special officer is following a suspect, who in most cases proves to be a real offender. Gradually, after she has been present at innumerable interviews that take place in the little room, has listened to all sorts of excuses and falsehoods, has been present at court when cases were tried and guilty ones convicted through her testimony, she becomes hardened and seldom allows her personal feelings to creep in.

"I am late in getting on the floor this morning," she will confide to the woman buyer, "because I have been in court all morning. We just sent a woman up for six months. Caught her stealing, all right, and, say, the things she managed to accumulate were enough to fill a large sized store."

"What kind of a woman was she, and did she take it very hard when she was sent away? Has she a family?" inquires the woman buyer.

Desserts of a Thief.

"What difference if she has? A woman who steals deserves what she gets. We all like pretty things, and we all want money. But the only way for us to work hard for it. Why should another woman be

has worked at a counter in her department it is a different matter.

In a department store, in the French lingerie section, a very pretty girl had been promoted to the position of saleswoman after she had served as model in the ready to wear department and had undergone an apprenticeship as "confidante" in the basement, where her bright face and engaging manners helped her make sales. She was making progress and she fell into the habit of confiding the amount of her daily sales and her ambitions to the special officer.

"I want to become a successful saleswoman," she said, "and I try never to miss a sale. Some day the buyer will notice me and promote me to head of stock."

The buyer did notice her and she marvelled at the number of her sales. They were large and always the expensive things. She rejoiced at this addition to her force, until one day it occurred to her that the saleswoman was having too many articles returned for credit. The saleswoman who has large sales naturally has more credits than the one whose sales are less, but in this instance very few credits came back through the regular channels of delivery. They were brought in during the day by the customer, who invariably wanted her money back and received it.

The buyer called the attention of the special officer to this coincidence. She watched, and her fears were realized. The woman was handing out blouses, petticoats and lingerie to her confederates. In this case they were her sisters and relatives. The merchandise was secreted and carried away. The original price ticket remained, the only means of identification required for a credit, and so, when after a few days the articles were brought to the credit desk, the cash was refunded and the goods placed on the shelves.

Working with a Confederate.

Another young woman was caught recently working in conjunction with a male employee in the men's furnishing department. The girl was a "freelance," her work consisting of inspecting the merchandise as it was handed to her by the salesman after having been sold, comparing the price ticket with the schedule, stamping it "O. K." and wrapping it for delivery. She had been taught different ways of robbing the store by the man whose dupe she had become. One was through the schedule. He would sell a straw hat for \$5 and make out a schedule for it as "alteration on hat, fifty cents."

The girl would inspect it and stamp it. She would then wrap it and hand it to the customer or send it through the tubes for delivery. This happened with all the merchandise sold by the salesman. There was no way to trace it and the true state would have remained unknown indefinitely had not the young saleswoman flaunted her property. She fell into the habit of making purchases in the store out of proportion to her salary. She always paid cash and carried a large roll of bank notes for the purpose. Gossip had it that she was engaged to be married to a millionaire and that he was supplying the funds necessary for a trousseau.

When this information reached the special officer she laughed and began to watch. She knew that the saleswoman was constantly in the company of the salesman from the men's furnishing department, whose salary was too small to allow of extravagance. Both were caught and punished.

In the millinery department there are transactions where the customer is implicated, although punishment cannot be meted out to her. In due course she remained in ignorance of the fact that she is accessory to a theft. A customer comes into the millinery department carrying her last season's hat, which she desires to use again. She wants to economize, she tells the saleswoman, because she intends investing in an ostrich feather. The dishonest saleswoman takes her aside and talks to her in a confidential way, willing to spend for the feather? She inquires. The customer responds, "I will gladly pay \$15 if I can get a very nice one."

This opens the way for the saleswoman. "I will tell you what I can do for you. I know a wholesale house where I can buy ostrich feathers at cost. If you will give me the \$15 I will send you a feather worth \$25. I will hand it to you and you can have it put on a 'hold ticket' as your own material, of course if it were known that I did this I would lose my position."

Naturally the customer is delighted. She does not think about it being irregular; she imagines that the saleswoman is doing this favor out of friendship. She does not dream that the saleswoman goes deliberately to the feather counter, where there are feathers in such abundance that one will never be missed.

A lot of work for the special officer comes through the delivery department. When an article is sold the saleswoman makes out her schedule, the article is inspected and sent to this department. In due course it should be delivered at the customer's home. Very often it disappears mysteriously. The first intimation of this comes when the customer sends word that she has been charged with an article which she has never received. The special officer must trace the missing article from purchase to disappearance.

She questions the saleswoman, looks at her schedule and finds a record of the sale, and if it is found to be correct she eliminates her. Then she goes to the basement and to the sub-basement to find out whether the package has been "stepped." If this has not been done then she knows that she confronts an "inside job." This means that there is a dishonest person in the delivery, who has managed to take the package off the trucks between the time it left the tubes and before it arrived in the "stealing room." This often happens when the package contains jewelry, for this class of merchandise, being generally wrapped in special paper and sealed, is conspicuous.

It is easy to slip a package off a truck. If an article of this kind has been "booted" and has a clean record as having passed safely through the delivery without being tampered with, the special officer must look up the men on the delivery wagons and find out what they have to say. Many times packages are lost after they have been placed on the delivery wagons. At night when the wagons are loaded they are sent to the stables, where they remain overnight. During the period before they are delivered all sorts of things can happen. The contents of a box can be taken out, while to all appearances it remains as it was originally packed. The boys on the wagon may claim that they have made the delivery, and swear that they handed the package to the doorman of an apartment hotel or to the chambermaid of a boarding house. These people, if found and interviewed, will fail to remember such a package, or if they do will state that it disappeared from the hallway and that they had supposed the woman to whom it was addressed had taken it.

When a Customer Is Guilty.

Sometimes the employee is innocent and the customer is the guilty person. In boarding houses or apartment hotels a customer may take her package to her room with her and assert she never received it. Of course the customer will not pay for merchandise which she has not received and the department store makes good the loss. The special officer is best instructed to lift the matter, and upon her report the department store acts.

A woman purchased a suit of clothes for her little boy. She ordered it sent and asserted that she did not receive it. The special officer investigated and found that the suit had passed safely out of the store and had at least reached the threshold of the woman's home, but she lived in an apartment house where the colored attendants were blessed with poor memories.

It was finally decided to send the woman another suit of clothes, as this was what she requested, saying that she did not wish her money back. This request was a point in her favor, for in most cases the return of the money is demanded, which leaves the customer with merchandise and money.

The special officer was sent to inform her of the store's decision, when something in her manner awakened her suspicions. After she left the woman's apartment she loitered about the neighborhood and caught a youngster with a suit identical with the one which was at that moment missing.

Questioning the boy, she learned that he was the son of the woman she had just left. Furthermore, he was wearing the new suit for the first time, and his mother had promised one like it within a few days. The second suit did not arrive and no more was heard from the woman who tried to dress two children for the price required for one.



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"I want to become a successful saleswoman," she said, "and I try never to miss a sale. Some day the buyer will notice me and promote me to head of stock."

The buyer did notice her and she marvelled at the number of her sales. They were large and always the expensive things. She rejoiced at this addition to her force, until one day it occurred to her that the saleswoman was having too many articles returned for credit. The saleswoman who has large sales naturally has more credits than the one whose sales are less, but in this instance very few credits came back through the regular channels of delivery. They were brought in during the day by the customer, who invariably wanted her money back and received it.

The buyer called the attention of the special officer to this coincidence. She watched, and her fears were realized. The woman was handing out blouses, petticoats and lingerie to her confederates. In this case they were her sisters and relatives. The merchandise was secreted and carried away. The original price ticket remained, the only means of identification required for a credit, and so, when after a few days the articles were brought to the credit desk, the cash was refunded and the goods placed on the shelves.

Another young woman was caught recently working in conjunction with a male employee in the men's furnishing department. The girl was a "freelance," her work consisting of inspecting the merchandise as it was handed to her by the salesman after having been sold, comparing the price ticket with the schedule, stamping it "O. K." and wrapping it for delivery. She had been taught different ways of robbing the store by the man whose dupe she had become. One was through the schedule. He would sell a straw hat for \$5 and make out a schedule for it as "alteration on hat, fifty cents."

The girl would inspect it and stamp it. She would then wrap it and hand it to the customer or send it through the tubes for delivery. This happened with all the merchandise sold by the salesman. There was no way to trace it and the true state would have remained unknown indefinitely had not the young saleswoman flaunted her property. She fell into the habit of making purchases in the store out of proportion to her salary. She always paid cash and carried a large roll of bank notes for the purpose. Gossip had it that she was engaged to be married to a millionaire and that he was supplying the funds necessary for a trousseau.

When this information reached the special officer she laughed and began to watch. She knew that the saleswoman was constantly in the company of the salesman from the men's furnishing department, whose salary was too small to allow of extravagance. Both were caught and punished.

In the millinery department there are transactions where the customer is implicated, although punishment cannot be meted out to her. In due course she remained in ignorance of the fact that she is accessory to a theft. A customer comes into the millinery department carrying her last season's hat, which she desires to use again. She wants to economize, she tells the saleswoman, because she intends investing in an ostrich feather. The dishonest saleswoman takes her aside and talks to her in a confidential way, willing to spend for the feather? She inquires. The customer responds, "I will gladly pay \$15 if I can get a very nice one."

This opens the way for the saleswoman. "I will tell you what I can do for you. I know a wholesale house where I can buy ostrich feathers at cost. If you will give me the \$15 I will send you a feather worth \$25. I will hand it to you and you can have it put on a 'hold ticket' as your own material, of course if it were known that I did this I would lose my position."